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Finish Him!

Abstract

The announcer yells *Fight!*, and the cage door thumps, and it's Rickster on the other side of the pit. "Hey, Rick," I say, "thanks for letting me borrow the mower." But Rick is all Rickster in the pit. He is wearing his luchador getup: jungle-cat pelt slung over his shoulder, spandex pants, pink-and-yellow wrestling mask. He's holding a pair of mallet-sized hobby horses with unicorn horns. He looks good. You can tell he lifts, doesn't skimp on the crunches.

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Fiction by Joshua Shaw

The announcer yells *Fight!*, and the cage door thumps, and it's Rickster on the other side of the pit. "Hey, Rick," I say, "thanks for letting me borrow the mower." But Rick is all Rickster in the pit. He is wearing his luchador getup: jungle-cat pelt slung over his shoulder, spandex pants, pink-and-yellow wrestling mask. He's holding a pair of mallet-sized hobby horses with unicorn horns. He looks good. You can tell he lifts, doesn't skimp on the crunches.

I look like a plush armadillo. When they recruited me, the pit masters, they asked about my fighting style. What weapons do I prefer? Naturally, they didn't come right out and ask. They never do. They're always so cryptic: *You face an implacable foe who seeks your destruction and broaches no mercy. How do you survive such a confrontation? Told them I'd move to a better zip code. What is the most powerful force in the universe?* "Inertia," I said. "Not-getting-shit-doneness."

They sighed. I settled for pillows.

They're yellow and fuzzy. I lash them to my back, my arms, my legs, anywhere to soften the pain. Like I said, I look like a yellow armadillo, a stuffed toy you might win at a carnival if you had buckets of money to waste. They even call me "The Amarillo Armadillo." I wish they would just call me Ray.

Honestly, I don't know what they expect. I mean, I do but I don't, if you know what I mean. They expect me to fight. But who thought *that* was a good idea? I'm an unmarried, forty-seven-year-old bassoonist who once managed the music section of a Barnes & Noble in Lackawanna, New York. My greatest accomplishments are that I own a handlebar moustache children long to pull and that I once farted so loudly during a performance of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* that I got kicked out of the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra. I like NPR, pornography, and blueberry pancakes. Really, I have no business fighting. But these things happen, I guess. By which I mean mistakes.

Rickster spins like a hurricane of eighties nostalgia, a neon blur of *Footloose* dance moves. He sweeps me off my feet with one unicorn-on-a-stick, pounds me with the other. I close my eyes. The little trolls who collect our bodies will haul me away soon.

Silver lining: I'm only a few matches away from my fight with My Fair Lady Maud.

#

Maud and I are soul mates, by which I mean that she lives in the condo across the street. We drink Long Island iced teas in the evenings. It's our thing. We meet around seven on days when our shifts end early. I bring lawn chairs and hooch; she supplies ice. We kick back in her driveway, prop our feet on her cooler, bask in the evening breeze. We try to ignore the screams, the smoke from the pits, the drumbeats, the chanting, the razor wire and electrified fencing that enclose our compound. We talk.

Maud's been married four times. Says her last husband was an SOB but the first three were fine: all good men, all dead. She says she was once quite the looker. She worries about the afterlife. Her husbands are waiting, and Maud isn't sure how she'll distribute herself among them. She speculates that heaven will be a log cabin on a lake, with a well-worn path on its banks, and each husband, save the SOB, will have a cabin too, and Maud will spend her days walking the path, visiting each, gardening, drinking cocktails while they play cards or reminisce, or make love, or whatever. She'll nap at her own place when she gets tired.

My theory is we're distilled to essences, a word, a sound, and, consequently, it won't be husbands waiting but something more like a collection of notes, a chord being endlessly strummed, and she a note as well, and you and me too, all of us notes in a grand and magnificent song.

"I don't think my E.W. would like that," Maud says. "E.W. liked singing songs too much to be one."

E.W. is Maud's second husband, E.W. Jackson. Apparently, he was a trivially famous country musician. I looked him up. He had a few hits: "I'm Still Waiting to Miss You," "This Train Don't Take Y'all Home." There are pictures on Wikipedia, an old black-and-white headshot of a squeaky-clean twenty-something, hair slicked in a pompadour, a color candid from later in life, a potbellied cowboy with a bolo tie and toothpick, sleeves rolled to expose meaty forearms. Maud insists she is in the background—an out-of-focus explosion of peroxide-blond hair.

Sometimes, I bring my bassoon and try to woo Maud with impromptu concerts in her driveway. I fire off dizzying snippets of Mozart's *Bassoon Concerto in B-flat Major*, passages that turn my fingers into a blur as I tickle the tone holes and keys. I sway and bop for her amusement. It should melt her heart, but Maud wears an expression a hairbreadth more aggrieved than the one she'd flash upon discovering the printer has run out of ink. "Well, Maud," I ask between pants, "what'd you think?"

She changes the subject.

I'm probably in love with Maud, though I wouldn't be if we weren't pit fighters. She's a Republican. I'm a Democrat. She says tomato. I point out that organic non-GMO tomatoes have more lycopene than non-organic counterparts. I'm too fat. She is dumber than a sack of hammers. But here we are kindred. For there are things only we can comprehend of one another—how the weight of a day spent killing and being killed lingers in our chitchat about the vegetables ripening in our curbside gardens, the geese migrations overhead. Typically, I talk and Maud does not so much listen as tolerate my bleating. It is, in a way, the sound of the last man on Earth.

Maud's consideration goes to show it's better to be loved by someone than no one at all. Surely that must count for something.

The thing about Maud is, she has great thighs. That sounds sexist, but it's true. It's hot here near the pits. Maud wears cutoffs, so I get lots of opportunities to gander.

Her thighs: they're womanly, not girly, dimpled and bruised, but by God you get the sense that if you laid your head on them, you'd get a good night's sleep. By which I mean you really would get a good night's sleep: You'd wake feeling well rested, surprised you slept so serenely, so untroubled by fear, and you'd wonder when you last enjoyed such a slumber, and you'd suspect it was years ago, falling asleep in a car as a child as your parents drove home in the night from vacation, and you'd feel a splash of gratitude that mere thighs could quiet your worrying mind.

That is to say, “good night’s sleep” is not some euphemism for sex. Although, yes, I would like to have sex with Maud. I think about it a lot.

Once, I kissed her thighs. We’d been drinking, running low on supplies. I’d gone into Maud’s kitchen to slice limes for Rickey’s and nicked myself good. She held my hand under the faucet. There was a photograph clamped onto her refrigerator with a magnet, a souvenir from Glacier National Park, Maud astride a boulder, staring at the clouds over big sky country. I kissed her.

She didn’t return it but didn’t push me away, so I embraced her, dropped my hands to her hips, held her awkwardly, kissed her again.

Thing is, it felt so good.

The human body has a solidity that’s out-and-out magic. So easy to forget how each of us is a beehive of secrets. A touch reminds. You’re holding a physical thing, to be sure, but it’s ghosted. Call it a mind. A soul. Whatever. It touches back, embraced and embracing. I hadn’t felt so good in so long. Was I horny? Yes. But in an I-might-just-be-laughing way, as if someone had installed a trap door in my loins, and opened it, and all my breath was rushing away. I sunk to my knees, wrapped my arms around Maud’s legs like she was a balloon I didn’t want to fly away.

I kissed her thighs. They weren’t salacious kisses; I just wanted to dissolve. But Maud suspected seduction. “Uh-uh,” she said. “We got sunsets. That’s all.”

Things changed. We still met in the evenings, but it felt like we’d been abducted by aliens and replaced with pod people, only the aliens had bungled their abduction reports, and our replacements had gone on pretending to be us long after it was necessary. Once, I tried to rile her up, tried to coax a genuine reaction, by drunkenly crooning a few lines of E.W. Jackson’s “Still Waiting to Miss You.” *Now, my heart may be beating like an old freight train. My eyes may be tearing like a whiskey stain. And I may be listening to the sound of the rain, as it taps on the roof of this Chevy. But, darling, I’m still waiting to miss you.* All my crooning earned was a glare. “Don’t ever,” Maud said. For three days she refused to sip teas with me.

#

Maud’s pit-fighter name is The Fair Lady. She wears a knight’s helmet, gauntlets, a Girl Scout sash draped around a tank top, and thigh-high socks and a barely-there tartan skirt. She hates it—thinks it’s ridiculous the way they’re trying to shoehorn her

at age fifty-two into some Joan-of-Arc-meets-sexy-schoolgirl getup. But what can she do? What can any of us?

She favors a sword-and-board combo. Don't call her sword a sword though. "It ain't a sword," she snapped at me once. "It's an EE-PEE."

"An EP?"

"Yeah. It's French."

I look forward to the days when I draw Maud as an opponent. I don't know why. She's all business in the pit. I suppose it's reassuring to think I'll die at the hands of a friend.

Also, it gives me an excuse to hold her. It never lasts. Maud impales me on average about twelve seconds after we enter the pit. But usually I can squeeze off a hug as I slide down her sword. I try to whisper something friendly. "Hey, Maud, saw that fawn in your yard. You're right: she is delightful." Or, "Hey, Maud, came across a gazpacho recipe on Pinterest. Bring some over later, m'kay?" The downside is that fighting her requires me to get stabbed in the gut with an epee, which, I won't lie, hurts like hell.

But, hey, at least it's Maud doing the stabbing.

#

After Rickster beats me senseless, and the little trolls revive me, I face off against Baron von Striper, The Surge, Count Barracuda. Basically, I get my ass handed to me all afternoon. By the time I get to my match with Maud, they've changed up the rules.

They place us above a pit of lava, with lots of ropes and nets, gangplanks and trampolines. We're handed staves whose ends are cupped like a jai alai cesta. The goal is to knock each other into the lava. Periodically spectators throw items down, and we can, if we wish, scoop them up and try to knock each other off by hurling debris.

"Hey, Maud," I say, and give her a friendly wave as I hop onto my starting platform. "You got a package from FedEx. Didn't think you'd want it to get rained on, so I put it in my garage. I'll bring it over later, m'kay?" I know Maud won't answer, but, still, I like to begin our fights by reminding her I care. Sure enough, she says nothing.

The announcer yells, *Fight!*

Maud wastes no time. Immediately she starts clambering across the web of nets. I scramble.

The thing that sucks about fighting over lava is that being burnt to death hurts. I mean, it really hurts, far worse than being bludgeoned with unicorns-on-a-stick or getting flogged with barracuda-nunchakus. Silver lining? I'm a quitter, not a fighter, and there are plenty of places to scramble. I have no illusions. I'm overweight, out of shape. I won't escape Maud's clutches, but our match should last a smidge longer than usual, which means I'll have more time to chat her up.

I grab a rope, shimmy-swing to another platform, tromp across a gangplank, and hop to a trampoline. My antics frustrate Maud. It's difficult for her to swing and climb in her armor. I'll tire soon, but for now she can't touch me. She stomps her feet in frustration.

I'm clambering onto a second platform when I hear a hideous sound, a shriek I suppose, but so liquidly deranged it's nearly unrecognizable, more sheer Lovecraftian terror than auditory phenomenon. Then something really soft hits me really hard in my neck. I drop to my belly. I peek over the edge to find out what Maud's throwing.

That's when I see it: she has a guinea pig loaded in her stick.

Whoever or whatever is watching us fight, the mystery audience at the top of the pit, they are throwing guinea pigs onto us. Some fall into the lava, emit piercing whistle-screams as their bodies burst into flames. Others land on the platforms, the netting, as gracefully as can be expected from plummeting guinea pigs. They scramble. They limp. Some shiver with fear. The guinea pig in Maud's *jai alai* stick has snowy white fur. He belongs elsewhere, a daycare center where children would name him Snowball and feed him carrots and celery.

"Maud!" I yell. "Don't! You're better than this."

It's no good. She winds up, spins, hurls Snowball. Misses by yards.

I poke my head over the platform. Maud is already loading her stick with another guinea pig, a brown one with a little white mask. "*Enough*, Maud," I say. I duck behind the platform as she launches Cinnamon. This time her aim is true. There is a thwack, and the platform shakes.

I decide then and there to make a change.

Some things, friends, are worth fighting for, even if it costs us thighs that could melt all our fears. Guinea pigs are somewhere on that list.

I roll off the platform, drop to the net. I'm struggling to get to my feet when I notice Maud is out of ammunition. There's a black-and-white guinea pig on her platform, but he is a scrapper; Maud's having a tough time collecting him. By the time she snatches him, I'm bearing down on her. She doesn't have time to load her stick, so she underhands him at me.

What happens next is difficult to explain. Time slows. Maybe it's the adrenalin. Maybe it's something spiritual, the universe hesitating to give a pair of imperfect creatures a chance to offset its moral degradation in a small but meaningful way. I watch as the guinea pig tumbles through space, paws scratching, teeth nipping. Our eyes lock; a silent conversation transpires.

I ask his name.

He says, "Pepperjack."

I tell Pepperjack the essence of heroism, perhaps love, is to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the other. I tell him I don't wish to harm him, that I shall not use him without his consent, but that we inhabit a time in which grim choices must be made.

Does he understand?

Pepperjack nods.

I roll out of the way with fluid grace, more windblown ribbon than man, cradling Pepperjack in my stick's pocket. I keep moving, somersaulting, and swipe him at Maud. My aim is true; Pepperjack's wrath is blistering. He hurtles through the air, teeth and claws bared, barrels into Maud's helmet with a *spong*, clawing her visor even as her feet go out from under her. Time resumes its hurried beat.

To my surprise, Maud's head pops off her body. Her helmet rolls as her body flops. "Maud!" I shout. I race to hold her. Where her neck should be there is, instead, a flat patch of skin. For a moment, I wonder if I've made a mistake. Maybe Maud isn't The Fair Lady after all, but then I consider her thighs and I know I cannot be wrong.

They have taken her. The pit masters. Her head, anyway.

They have taken the head of the woman I may kind of sort of love.

#

Needless to say, I'm pissed the next time they throw me into the pit. This time it's a regular arena, no lava. My opponent is dressed in what appears to be the mascot's costume of a Major League Baseball team—a neon-green chicken suit with cybernetic chainsaw claws. He calls himself Rex Rooster. I barely see him as I'm so worked up. The second the cage door opens I'm tearing off a pillow, hurling it so hard it detonates across Rex's face in a downy explosion. He's still dazed when I drop kick him through his cage door.

Finish him! the announcer yells.

I'm not sure what to do as I've never survived a match. Never figured I'd have to invent a fatality.

I decide to drag Rex by his ankles, pretending to be Achilles dragging Hector's body around the walls of Troy. I mime foreseeing my death reflected in the eyes of Rex's father and offer to return him to a Priam if the audience will but present one. I shout, "Guess what, sweet peas! There are ways to kill respectfully. So, suck on it!"

Princess Twizted, Mister Psylence, Muy Frigido, I tear through opponents all afternoon. My cage door bangs open. Ordinarily, I don't go for the whole opening quip routine: Vengeance will be mine! You killed my father! Prepare to die! That sort of thing. But I'm so stoked about my successes, I decide to give it a try. "I kick ass for a living," I trill, "and it's summertime, and living is easy."

Then I see my opponent. It's Maud. Her head.

They've mounted it on a pickup. I cannot determine the make or model, but it's definitely blue, definitely American-made. A Ford? A Chevy? Whatever goes best with chest hair and keeping America American. The windows are tinted, the driver unknown. Maud's head is mounted on the hood. Her eyes are closed, her mouth pinched in a wicked grin, a creepy, misogynist hood ornament, but then her eyes pop open. She winks, does a peal out in lieu of a quip, kicking up sand as she spins. There is a sticker on her bumper. It says, "These Colors Don't Run."

Fight! the announcer yells.

I'd like to say I survive more than a moment, that I'm still in the zone, weaving through Maud's assaults in a flurry of flip-floppy gymnastics. The truth is she finishes me off in a breath. I'm so baffled at the sight of her that I cannot even squeak as she barrels forward, engine roaring, and crushes me into the ground. A faraway feeling creeps over me, like a puddle in a high-speed photograph, all quivers of ripples in no great hurry to get where they're going.

Some part of me, I suppose, must recognize the sound as Maud's cab door cracks open, the jangle of spurs and the boozy rendition of "This Train Don't Take Y'all Home" being whistled as the footsteps approach. Some part must see the silhouette of the potbellied cowboy standing over me, smell his cologne, black pepper and spearmint and the smell a longhorn might wear if it taught itself to walk upright and got a job as a salesman at a riding lawn mower store.

The truth is I am too busy counting stars.

Night has fallen. The stars should be indiscernible behind the spotlights, which crane over the lip of the pit, but they come out one by one in a clear and quiet sky.

Finish him! the announcer barks.

Maud's cowboy reaches down, wrenches the heart from my chest. "What?" Maud sneers. "Too literal for you, Ray?"

Sometimes I wish she could see inside my mind. There are no sharp edges.

I am thinking of a game I used to play as a child: roll paper tubes, pretend they are telescopes. Sight down stars, planets. Then, little by little, close the gap with my fingers until only slivers remain. Hide it all behind my palm, imagine it is disappearing. All space. Nothing to see us anymore. "Hey, Maud," I might whisper, "close my eyes." No dreams tonight. Insert a coin. Try again tomorrow.

Joshua Shaw is a philosophy professor at Penn State Erie. He has published a book and several journal articles in philosophy, but only began writing fiction a few years ago, when he noticed how much joy his colleagues in creative writing received from their writing. His stories can be found in *Hobart* and in *James Gunn's Ad Astra*.